

Nehemiah 9

Please reach behind you and pick out the bible in the pocket on the back of your chair and turn to the page 474 and Nehemiah 9.

If you were born in the 70s and grew up watching British Saturday morning kids TV in the 80s you should find this next question fairly easy to answer. Who is this? **OHP**

That's right its Timmy Mallett and he had a kids show called? Wacaday.
You'll probably remember the game that he played on his show too, which was? Mallett's Mallet. **OHP**

The idea of the game was really simply.

It was a word association game, two kids sat on stools facing each other and Timmy would give one of them a word, instinctively you had to think of another, different word which had some kind of natural relationship to the previous word, then the second kid had to respond to that word. And so it would go back and forth between the two of them.

Repeat a word, hesitate or say something irrelevant and you get a bash on the head from Mallet's mallet.

(this is Jason Donovan losing to his opponent). **OHP**

You had to think quickly and instinctively for something that had a clear connection, and it had to be different or you got hit by a neon coloured piece of foam.

So why do I tell you this, besides the chance to delve nostalgically into my childhood? **OHP (black)** Well I want you to play a little word association with me. In a moment I'm going to say a word and I want to call to mind immediately another one; something you instinctively associate with mine, might be a phrase, a place or a name – BUT don't think about it, just instinctively and reactively call to mind your most natural association to my word.

There is no need to say it out loud, just hold your word in your head.

Okay? Understand? Great, ready? Here comes the word... **OHP**

EVIL

Okay, got your first instinctive association to my word?

How many of you thought of an event?
How many thought of a person?
Were they fictional? Or real?

We'll hold on to that association as we'll come back to it later, **OHP** but now we're going to read our passage which is Nehemiah 9

The bulk of the passage we're about to read is a prayer, which is said by the people now living in Jerusalem. Some have worked under Nehemiah and rebuilt the city walls, some have just returned to the city from exile as read in chp7. We've come to the part of the book where Nehemiah and other leaders see that it's time to restore the nation now the walls are complete. And the restoration began in chp 8 which Vincent spoke on last week.

The prayer we have here, in chp 9 is a confession which comes as a response to hearing the law of God being read out by Ezra. In essence the prayer is an apology to God for the wrong doing, the evil committed by the nation. They reflect on their long history and recall the events around the birth of the nation under Abraham and Moses by God's hand.

And there are three questions **OHP** we can usefully ask to get to the heart of the prayer:
OHP • What does the prayer tell us about the people's association to evil?

OHP • What do we learn about their view of God?

- And in both instances

OHP • How do their views compare with ours?

(Julian) is going to come and read the passage for us in a moment and as he does take note of this basic structure: **OHP**

1-4 [sets the] Context of the prayer
5 Call [to pray] from the religious leaders
6 [God's hand in] Creation
7-8 Abraham
9-11 Exodus [from Egypt]
11-21 Wilderness and wanderings through the desert under Moses
22-31 Promised Land
32-37 Appeal by the people for God to bring about change
38 Commitment made by the leaders

Also look out for a curious statement, something which stands out as pretty strange and shapes the whole tone of the prayer. I'll give you a clue it comes fairly early on in chapter and it's not what they are wearing (though that is pretty strange too).

So let's read it together....

Okay did you spot it? Do you see the strange statement?

Well it's the second half of vs 2 **OHP**
They stood in their places and confessed their sins
and the sins of their ancestors.

Why do they confess the sins of their ancestors? It seems an unusual thing to say doesn't it?

Well understanding this phrase is going to help us answer our first question:

• What does the prayer tell us about the people's association to evil?

If you have been a Christian for a few years you'll be used to the idea of confessing your sins; saying sorry for those moments when you have lived outside of the will of God, those moments when you're not living to please your maker, but you live to please yourself.

And for many of us making a personal confession for the wrong doing in our lives before God is a familiar and regular habit.

Its also at the heart of the communion, the Lord's supper isn't it? Which we'll be performing shortly, that causes us to reflect on our wrong doing, our failure to live up to God's expectations. The symbols of bread and wine, or juice for us, remind us of Jesus' sacrifice, his death which paid and covered the penalty for our individual and personal violations.

But the idea of doing this for another seems strange, right? I'm only accountable for what I've done, not what you've done, or even what my dad has done... so why do they confess the sins of their ancestors?

Well essentially what we read about here is God's people identifying with the disobedience, the evil, of previous generations and honestly admitting that the examples from their past illustrate the evil in their present.

They recognise the failure of their ancestors has left a legacy of continued disobedience that lived on in Nehemiah's generation.

And as they reflect on their history in the prayer they recall the characteristics of their ancestors:
OHP What do they remember about them? Look with me:

In **vs 16 - 17** they describe their ancestors as proud and arrogant, stiff necked, fixed on a direction that meant they would not obey. **OHP**

The prayer says that they've refused to listen and failed to remember God's help and intervention in their circumstances.

We read they rebel, appoint new leaders and in **vs 18 OHP** they commit awful blasphemies – in other words they show an lack of respect, an irreverence and contempt for God preferring a deaf and mute golden statue to the author of life.

and again in **vs 26 OHP**
they're described as disobedient and rebellious
they ignore God's law, the contract they had agreed to follow in Ex 19
they also kill those who God sent to bring his message via the prophets

and it keeps coming **vs 28 OHP**
they did evil

vs 29 OHP
arrogant
Disobedient
sinned
turned their backs to God
refused to listen

vs 30 OHP
paid no attention

vs 34 OHP
failed to follow the law
did not pay attention
did not serve God
did not turn from their evil

and the consequence to all of these characteristics?
Vs 28 They were abandoned and
Vs 30 given over to their enemies and
Vs 36 ultimately they were oppressed again, like in Egypt,

But notice the switch in **vs 37** because of **our** sins. They recognised the situation that brought them great distress was not simply down to the mistakes of their ancestors. They recognised that the evil of the previous generations and their present failures had brought about their current circumstances, finding themselves as slaves to the Persians.

So what do you think to this list and these descriptions?
Are these words which you can easily identify with or do they feel distant and remote to you? Do the words seem a bit antiquated? Perhaps a bit out of date, an old fashioned view of the world that we've since grown out of?

This is an ancient culture and so perhaps feels primitive to many of us in our modern, advanced and sophisticated culture, so when we think about our own situation **how do their views about evil compare with ours? OHP**

As we talk with our friends, neighbours and family who don't believe in God how easily would they relate to this description of a community reflecting on its moral failure to obey God? As we consider Israel's evil many of our friends and family would not be happy to see themselves in the same light would they?

And that's because we're used to defining evil in a different way, we have a different set of associations; ones which are shaped by extreme examples; situations that are a million miles away from our daily experiences. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Firstly in the world of fiction:

In 2003 the American Film Institute made a documentary that celebrated greatest heroes and villains over the previous 100 years of cinema and they put together a list of the fiftieth greatest villains to appear in a film, here's the first 9 of their top 10 **OHP** – can you name the character and the film?

First top left is?

10. The Queen Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

9. Regan MacNeil/Pazuzu from the 1973 horror film The Exorcist

8. Phyllis Dietrichson Double Indemnity a 1944 American film noir, directed by Billy Wilder a provocative housewife who wishes her husband were dead

Next row far left is?

7. Alex Forrest Fatal Attraction

6. Mr. Potter It's a Wonderful Life

5. Nurse Ratched One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Bottom row far left

4. The Wicked Witch of the West Margaret Hamilton The Wizard of Oz

3. Darth Vader Star Wars

2. Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) Psycho

Who do you think is number one? Bear in mind this list was made in 2003 and Christopher Nolan's Batman film The Dark Knight was made in 2008 so the AFI had yet to witness Heath Ledger's portrayal of the Joker.

OHP No 1: Dr. Hannibal Lecter, Silence of the Lambs

Now I'm not condoning these films necessarily and certainly wouldn't want you to think I'm encouraging you watch them, especially if you're not the right age, but what is striking about this list is that AFI likes villains to be pretty dark and nasty. **OHP** (black)The portrayal of evil in many of these films is at the extreme end of the range, obsessive murderers, cannibals, witches, demon possessed and Lord of the Dark side.

These are, at times, provocative and sometimes entertaining films in which the antagonist and even the protagonist are nothing like us, committing barbaric acts of evil.

But you don't just see extreme examples in works of fiction, think of our media coverage and recent news stories. For something evil to be noteworthy and newsworthy it has at times to be catastrophic in its impact. Reflect on three examples from the last 18 months:

OHP Former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic who faces 10 charges of genocide and crimes against humanity allegedly committed during the conflict in the 1990s

OHP Anders Behring Breivik the convicted perpetrator of the 2011 massacre in Norway when 77 died by his hand.

And of course in recent weeks **OHP**

The allegations of 300 incidences of child abuse against Jimmy Savile

These are all examples of the enormity of evil.

So let's imagine a scale with 'not evil' at one end **OHP** and down right evil at the other **OHP**; When you think about these guys we would all put them at extreme end wouldn't we? All the way over here on the (left).

Makes sense, seems reasonable.

Look at vs 18 Where would you put those who made the golden calf? Those who in the passage are described as committing awful blasphemies (not just blasphemy remember, but **awful** blasphemy) in where do they sit on the scale? **OHP**

Now recall what you thought of from our mallet's mallet word association, where does that event or person sit on the scale of evil? Perhaps here? **OHP**

Okay so now lets think for moment...

Where would you put yourself on this scale?

(You not a mass murderer, not a child abuser, not presided over any genocides, not eaten anyone's liver, not built any golden calves, but we both know you're far from perfect right? So maybe you're here? **OHP** No? Maybe here then? **OHP** But never here right? **OHP**

But here is the point of vs 2 and the purpose of the reflection on Israel's history in the confession is that Nehemiah and the people do not distance themselves from the evil of their ancestors.

The central problem in the portrayal of evil we see in the news and film industry is that it gives a false assumption about ourselves, that we're not as bad as them; none of us have committed anything like the same level of atrocity so we're able to distance ourselves from what we see as pure evil. We look at Jimmy Savile or Hannibal Lecter and say there is no way we're as bad as them – by camprison we're not evil, in fact we're good.

Instinctively when we think of evil we think and define it in terms of extremes.

And what this prayer shows us is that our scale for defining evil is fundamentally flawed, its wrong.

The scale that Nehemiah and his generation use is fixed on a very different axis.

OHP How do they define evil in the passage? Cannibalism? Child abuse? Mass murder? No.

OHP Vs 17 They refused to listen and failed to remember what God had done for them,

OHP vs 26 They were disobedient by putting God's concerns, his law behind them - actively ignoring the author of life.

OHP Vs 30 They paid no attention to God's warnings.

The significance of vs 2 is that they identify with and see a connection to the sins of their ancestors; the root of which was to ignore God.

When they say in vs37 because of **our** sins they are saying that they are no different, the core of the problem is the same as it was all those years ago; they have failed to remember and refused to listen to all that God has done and given.

There is no record of Nehemiah, Ezra and the other leaders from melting down gold earrings, bangles to make a golden calf to worship – but they recognise that their problem before God is on the same scale. It's no different.

Now I do not want you to think that I am, in anyway, cheapening the seriousness of the crimes committed by those I've mentioned. Instead we need to see that this passage and prayer forces us to consider that in the minds of Nehemiah and other leaders the crimes mentioned here are in the same league as Savile and the others. **OHP (scale)**

So (OHP) is our understanding of evil rooted in the same definition?

Romans 1:18 tells us: **OHP**

The anger of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's qualities and divine nature have been clearly seen... so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither honour him as God nor gave thanks to him...

In other words, the problem the Israel identifies with is not restricted only to their special national relationship with God; it's a problem for all of us. We read in Romans that the whole of humanity faces God's anger because of the same issue; we have all refused to listen and failed to remember the Author of Life. That will lead us all ultimately to the same destructive fate that hung over Israel's history. God has given us over to the thing that we want, a life without him

– but so what?

Well in chp 6 of Romans we read that the result of our refusal to listen and acknowledge God is death. Our destruction is the price we pay for ignoring God. It doesn't matter how good a life we live now in our own eyes because ultimately, the bible says we have committed the same mistakes as Nehemiah's generation in failing to acknowledge God's role in our lives.

And what we read in Nehemiah 9 is that Israel could see that the problem had a direct consequence on their daily lives.

But the story doesn't end there, the prayer doesn't allow us to remain holding a view that the LORD is angry and focussed on our destruction. The prayer contrasts the character of the Israelites with the character of God.

OHP (needs to match)

• **What do we learn about their view of God?**

It is really striking to reflect on how this prayer describes God.

Look with me at the various characteristics that the prayer attributes to God: (**OHP**)

Gives life to everything 6
Keeps his promises 8, 32
Sees vs 9
Hears vs 9, 27
Intervenes with signs and wonders vs10
Is engaged and aware 10
Well known 10
Leads, guides 12, 19
Is not distant 13
Speaks, 13
Reveals his will 14
Instructs 14, 15, 20

Provides:
Physical needs 21
Food 15, 20
Water 15, 20
Land 22, 23

Forgives 17
Is gracious and compassionate 17, 19, 31,
Slow to anger 17
Patient 30
Committed 17, 19, 31
Full of love 17
Defends 24
Rescues 27
Disciplines 28
Warns 29
Merciful 31
Faithful 8, 33
Mighty and awesome 32
Morally good 33

Now take a moment to reflection these words?
Which ones stand out for you and you look over this list?
Which could you speak of personal experience of?
Which are a contrast to your own assumptions about God?

It is often thought that the God portrayed in the OT is a vengeful, blood thirsty and selfish tyrant.

But that isn't the view reached by this prayer. But what we have here is a description of God which recognises that he is at work for the best interests of the people; a God of mercy and love committed to working for the good of the people.

And what has helped to set this tone? What is the lens through which this perspective is shaped? Well in vs 3 we see that it was the Law of God, which for three hours or so is read out to standing crowd. The law of God refers to the first five books of the bible and is in effect God's blueprint for how life should be lived especially for the Jews but with principles that are just as relevant for the church today.

The prayer is peppered throughout by references lifted from scripture, there are virtually no verses here which are not a quote from what they have just heard read to them.

And this is the pivot which sets out how we should view ourselves and God.

So as we reflect on this prayer we're to ask ourselves have we got the right view, are we allowing the bible to shape our outlook and understanding of God and ourselves, or have we settled instead for a caricature?

You know what a caricature is I'm sure, heres one **OHP(obama)** it is a description or a drawing that exaggerates and distorts the essence of someone, it will exaggerate some characteristics and oversimplify others.

What this prayer ask us to do is to cross reference our caricature about ourselves and God against the full picture provided for us in the bible.

In saying this prayer the people could see that God had been at work in their history and so looked to him to be at work again in their present difficulties. They had learnt that they needed to turn back to him and place him in his proper place.

As we reflect on this history and consider our own situations are we open to the possibility that God is at work for our good in the challenges we face? Do we believe that God has our best interests in mind when we reflect our circumstances? Are we asking him to show us what he wants us to learn from the things we face each day? And are we turning regularly to the scriptures expectant for answers?

OHP What better hope can we have than knowing that God is at work for our best interests?

Before we come to share the Lord's supper together we should stop to reflect on a promise given by Jesus, in John 10:10 Jesus says that he has come to give life and have to the full. He makes the claim if you want to find out what it means to be truly alive, to be fully human you need to orientate your life around him.

And it starts with agreeing with the summary we find in vs 33 **OHP**, in all that has happened to us You, [God] have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly.

As we come to take communion and reflect on the death of Christ, let's remember that this act is best demonstration of God's love for us, reflect on how committed God is to us by what Jesus did, not wanting any of us to perish but to taste life in all its fullness.

But lets also reflect on how seriously we view our sin, do we identify with the descriptions used about God's people? Or have we diluted our sin as being trival and inconsequential?

you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly.

Lets pray